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Alaska's Health Impact Assessment Program

Background

Public actions such as new legislation or agency decisions on new programs, policies, or projects (e.g., a new mine or oil development) can profoundly influence human health. When stakeholders collectively understand the potential health impacts of a public action prior to its implementation, they can preemptively develop strategies that minimize adverse health impacts and maximize health benefits.

What is Health Impact Assessment?

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is a combination of procedures, methods and tools by which a policy, program, or project may be judged as to its potential effects on the health of a population, and the distribution of those effects within the population.¹ Internationally, HIA has been performed extensively by governments, industry, and large lending organizations such as the World Bank, and established guidelines exist on HIA practice. In the United States, HIA practice is rapidly developing and numerous HIAs have been completed in diverse settings.² Several key institutions such as the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Health Impact Project (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts), and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) have facilitated growth in HIA capacity nationally.^{3, 4, 5}

An HIA can be a short desktop exercise that takes an expert practitioner less than 2 weeks to prepare, a rapid assessment that takes several months, or a comprehensive report that requires a year or more. The comprehensive HIA is unique because it requires gathering new data to cover knowledge gaps about the baseline health status of the potentially affected communities (PACs). The scale of the project and its potential for considerable health impacts are among the factors used to determine the level of HIA needed.

HIAs typically include several key steps (Table 1). Screening determines whether or not an HIA will be useful for a given project, while scoping involves determining the PACs and the most important health impacts that are likely to occur. Impact rating highlights the strongest positive and negative health impacts so the HIA team can develop appropriate recommendations. The results and recommendations are then formally documented in the HIA report. The last step involves monitoring and evaluating the effects of these recommendations over time.

Table 1. Key Steps of an HIA

Component	Activity
Screening	Determine if an HIA is needed
Scoping	Identify health impacts and PACs
Impact Rating	Assess positive & negative impacts
Recommendation	Suggest needed changes
Reporting	Share results with stakeholders
Monitor/Evaluate	Determine effects of HIA over time

HIA and NEPA

Many HIAs in Alaska take place within the framework of the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA, 1969). NEPA requires federal agencies to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) for any proposed federal action with the potential for significant environmental impacts. Increasingly, federal agencies are requesting that HIAs be performed in conjunction with EISs. Federal agencies typically request that public health experts at local/state/tribal agencies and/or private contractors conduct the HIAs.

HIA in Alaska

HIA work began in Alaska during 2004 when the North Slope Borough conducted two HIAs for resource development projects on the North Slope.⁶ In 2008, a conference on HIA was held in Anchorage and included experts from federal agencies, including CDC, state and local governments, regional health corporations, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, and expert HIA practitioners from the international arena. Conference attendees established a working group that developed a toolkit to provide technical guidance for Alaska-specific HIA practice (available at: www.epi.alaska.gov/hia). Working group participants also identified a clear need for one agency to maintain and update the HIA toolkit, respond to public feedback, and to lead ongoing efforts to develop Alaska's capacity for HIA. In response to this need and with support from partners, the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) established an HIA Program in July 2010.

The Alaska HIA Program is currently working on a number of HIAs for several large-scale natural resource development projects (Table 2). It is important to underscore that *HIAs are not legally required in Alaska*; rather, they are seen as one aspect of a "best practices" approach to responsible development.

Table 2. Current HIA Projects in Alaska

Project Name	Resource	HIA Level
Alaska Pipeline Project	Oil & Gas	Comprehensive
Chuitna Project	Coal	Comprehensive
Donlin Creek Project	Gold	Comprehensive
Foothills West (Umiat)	Roadway	Comprehensive
Pt. Thomson Project	Oil & Gas	Rapid Assessment
Pebble Prospect	Gold/Copper	Comprehensive
Wishbone Hill Project	Coal	Rapid Assessment

Summary

The Alaska HIA Program was created to protect and promote the health of communities affected by large-scale development projects in Alaska. An HIA toolkit is now available to help guide HIA best practices in Alaska. The Alaska HIA Program is currently working on a number of HIAs related to natural resource development projects. While HIAs are not required by state law, they are seen as one aspect of a "best practices" approach to responsible development in Alaska.

References

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